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ABSTRACT

"Peer mentoring," "peer coaching," and "colleagueship supervision" describe a process of professional improvement in which teachers assist other teachers in becoming more competent and innovative in the use of pedagogical skills. Recent evidence suggests that teachers feel the individuals most qualified to assist them in developing and refining instructional strategies and skills are other teachers. Typically, teachers are formally evaluated, however, by a building administrator with no expertise in teachers' subject areas. In rural schools, these problems are particularly acute, for a new teacher may be the only staff member with expertise in a particular discipline. This paper describes the benefits of a peer-mentoring program using master teachers as mentors. Master teachers are trained in effective teaching practices and peer coaching. These master teachers are available in a multi-district network for in-class observation and consultation in schools that may not have a master teacher available for a new teacher in a particular subject area. Problems identified include: difficulties in school cooperation, costs associated with peer-coach replacement and travel, peer-coach legal responsibilities, teachers' union approval of such projects, and the need for common definitions of "master teacher" and "peer coaches." (DHP)

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Peer Mentoring Exchange Program

Opportunities For Professional Improvement

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INTRODUCTION

As the population shifts, sometimes rather dramatically, from rural and suburban areas to large urban centers, serious problems arise for rural school districts. Teachers in small rural districts must increasingly teach a wide range of courses. In many instances, they may be the only math or modern language teacher in a school building. Declining tax bases often lead to a lack of funds for resources and supplies and exacerbate these other factors. Additionally, many rural districts present difficult conditions for probationary teachers as these individuals often feel personally, professionally, and culturally isolated.

The rather dramatic transition from the role of student teacher to the reality of first-year teacher is well documented. The first-year teacher goes from being supervised and tutored to a situation in which he/she is basically alone and responsible for successful professional practice. Rarely, is there a support team specifically designated to assist the first-year teacher in his/her induction into the profession. The first year teacher often seeks identity in the physical makeup of a classroom environment and in the grade level/subject area in which she or he is professionally assigned. In this scenario there is a distinct absence of peer interchanges which characterizes other professions.

Peer mentoring, peer coaching, and colleagueship supervision are current terms describing a process of professional improvement in which teachers assist other teachers in becoming more competent and innovative in the use of pedagogical skills. Recent evidence suggests that teachers feel the most qualified individual to assist in the development and refinement of teaching skills and strategies are other teachers. By contrast, usually teachers are formally evaluated once or several times by a "supervisor" most typically a building administrator who may or may not be familiar with a specific content area or program of study. On the other hand, when peers mentor other peers, the barriers of formal evaluation

are removed, allowing two colleagues to mutually plan and participate in a program of self-improvement.

There are three very distinct strands which influenced the development of this project: (a) the specific problems inherent in rural school districts; (b) the isolation and often inadequate preparation of first-year teachers; and (c) the obvious benefits of peer tutoring as a vehicle for improving professional skills as well as a means of strengthening collegial bonds. Essentially, this project posits a model for peer mentoring (and subsequent evaluation) of first-year teachers in rural school districts. The project also provides for mentors in one district to work with teachers in a second district, in essence, so that the pool of experienced teachers is greatly increased to meet the special problems existing in some rural schools.

This project enlists the cooperation of a number of different parties directly involved in the facilitation of effective teaching practices: (a) school boards, (b) school administrators, (c) experienced and novice teachers, (d) the state education agency, and (e) college faculty. In this sense, it is a truly collaborative process in which all constituencies of the educative process are represented. The project consisted of a number of evolutionary stages in which input from administrators, teachers, and the education agency were instrumental.

Rural Schools

It is interesting to note that a significant number of teachers in rural schools are beginners--new to their own particular school, new to small schools, and/or new to teaching (Dunne & Carlson, 1981). Massey and Crosby (1983) point out that rural schools are often characterized by small size and frequently by physical and/or cultural isolation. As a consequence, teachers in such schools must deal with three factors that most other teachers are less likely to

encounter: (a) broad curricular responsibilities, (b) extremely close relationships between community and school, and (c) personal and professional isolation. Although the schools that are included in the pilot phase of this project are generally small in size and somewhat rural in nature, they may not be as extreme in terms of isolation as indicated by Massey and Crosby. However, it is a reality that in a state such as Iowa, there is considerable consolidation of schools and/or sharing of resources. There is no question that teachers in these schools must play a variety of roles both within and outside the classroom. For some small rural communities, the school and its myriad activities, become the focal point of community life. When a community loses its school through consolidation, it is tantamount to a loss of a significant other in addition to the loss of identity.

With particular reference to peer tutoring, it is generally the case that there are few opportunities for pedagogical induction. What may characterize rural schools is the lack of time, energy, and resources to provide opportunities to new teachers for pedagogical induction. In short, everyone is busy fulfilling a host of roles. Frequently, the building administrator has responsibilities that extend beyond the boundaries of an elementary or secondary school assignment. Additionally, the first-year teacher may find himself/herself to be the only subject matter "expert" at the secondary level. There is also the problem of being physically distant from resources which might aid beginning teachers in acquiring materials necessary for quality instruction. Two words, isolation and lack of resources, might be said to characterize rural schools. This condition, however, in no way devalues the efforts and programs offered by rural schools. It does illustrate that there is much to be gained when rural school districts enter into an agreement with other districts to exchange resources.

In the context of the unique situation of rural schools, a peer mentoring project which increases the pool of qualified mentors for first-year teachers makes a great deal of sense. Peer mentors can act as resources, facilitators, models, observers, and active participants in the professional improvement of first-year teachers. When a network of master teachers becomes available for the induction process of beginning teachers, debilitating factors such as isolation and lack of resources become less prevalent.

Peer Mentoring

Due to constant demands, many principals, who are the primary evaluators for first-year teachers, find that they must function as educational managers rather than instructional leaders (Howell, 1981). They become reactive rather than proactive on matters of instruction, As a consequence, too little formal supervision is available for beginning teachers who are in need of feedback regarding the efficacy of classroom and pedagogical practice. When supervisory time is in short supply and the interests and abilities of the supervisor are not related to those of the beginning teacher, the benefits of observation and evaluation are further eroded. Inherent in this traditional supervisory model is a superior-subordinate relationship in which an individual with generalized knowledge is evaluating a beginning teacher in a specific subject matter area which may not match their area of expertise. Hence, the quality of the interaction concerning specific teaching strategies peculiar to a grade level or a discipline area may be much less effective.

If instructional improvement and peer growth are the principal goals of supervision, it seems rather obvious that peer mentoring can be a more effective, efficient, and rewarding way to meet these goals than the traditional hierarchial supervision-evaluation process (Bang-Jensen, 1986). One of the limitations of

American education is that teachers work in isolation and their immediate supervisors often have only a generalized perception of their teaching performance (Alfonso & Goldsberry, 1982). The peer mentor, by contrast, has first-hand knowledge of the other's performance. Indeed, studies indicate that teachers see their colleagues as their first choice for professional help, even in cases of supervisory assistance (Lortie, 1975). The peer mentor brings credibility and a sense of equity to the situation. Peer mentoring involves a partnership in which colleagues are working together toward the goal of instructional improvement. The mentor is a fellow teacher who has expertise in pedagogy as well as subject matter.

One of the substantive advantages to peer mentoring is that the whole process of instructional improvement occurs in an environment free of evaluative constraints. The role that the peer plays is not obligatory nor is it a matter of contract. Because peer mentors are freed from the typical charge to merge evaluation with improving instruction, the whole purpose of peer observation and subsequent feedback is one of teacher growth, as opposed to a series of determinations pertinent to a summative formal evaluation.

Some of the specific advantages to peer mentoring follow:

1. Actual classroom performance becomes the basis for improvement.

2. The observing teacher is in a position to note details that might elude the teacher who is absorbed with the dynamics of the process of teaching.

3. The mentor may improve his/her own skills as a result of the peer exchange.

4. The collective resources of several rural schools are mobilized in a joint effort to improve instruction.

5. The whole peer mentoring process enhances the notion of teacher empowerment and clearly indicates that teachers have much to contribute in the area of instructional improvement.

6. Peer mentoring can extend beyond first-year teachers eventuating in an organizational climate rich with collegial networks.

The whole process takes on special meaning within the context of rural schools. Given the reality of principals who are overburdened with numerous managerial functions, it makes good sense to establish a professional improvement program in which schools can exchange staff to provide a diverse and extensive resource base for beginning teachers. Lastly, given the fact that attrition is high in the teaching profession, especially among beginning teachers, an area of emphasis should be on improving the intrinsic rewards of teaching which accrue from the sense of accomplishment. It seems most likely that a peer mentoring model would contribute greatly to this sense of excellence.

APPENDIX

RURAL SCHOOLS' TEACHER SUPPORT TEAM

Purpose of Project

1. To operationalize a cost efficient and professionally-sound means of providing services for professional growth and development.

2. To create a networking of school districts, administrators, college professors, and classroom teachers working together to provide professional growth and development services for faculty.

3. To utilize large school districts as magnets for smaller satellite districts in rural settings to centralize delivery services with respect to matching on teacher's needs and desires with previously-identified master teachers. These master teachers have received clinical in-service training in the knowledge bases, skills, and attitudes of effective teaching practices #nd peer coaching.

4. To institute an equitable and collegial process for assisting teachers who have been required or elect to participate in a growth and development process.

Definition of Terms

1. Building Administrator

   The administrator is the individual who agrees to allow the growth and development process to take place. This individual initiates the growth and development process within a fixed time limit as specified by an administrative district policy.

2. Master Teacher

An individual, identified by an administrator in a given school district, who exemplifies outstanding teaching practices and exhibits a substantive understanding of his/her content area of specialty.

3. Clinical In-Service Workshop

A designated series of experiences which prepare master teachers to function as peer coaches.

4. Peer Coaches

Teachers identified as master teachers, who have completed a clinical in-service workshop consisting of units dealing with effective teaching practices and peer coaching. Peer coaches will be contracted to work wi,h "at risk" teachers and receive per diem monies for services provided.

Positive Aspects

1. Administrators in small rural districts with insufficient time to conduct a substantive growth and development process with teachers will be able to tap into a consortium of schools to hire a peer coach/coaches to provide growth and development services.

2. The creation of a university-based clinical in-service workshop will ensure that peer coaches receive adequate training in effective teaching practices as well as the dynamics of peer coaching.

3. Teachers may feel much less threatened and intimidated by the prospects of working with a peer coach, rather than the building administrator whose job it is to recommend retention or dismissal.

Issues to Consider

1. The necessity for school districts to work together, exchange peer coaches, within a designated geographical area.

2. The costs involved in replacing peer coaches while they are engaged in peer coaching; substitute teachers and per dies, expenses.

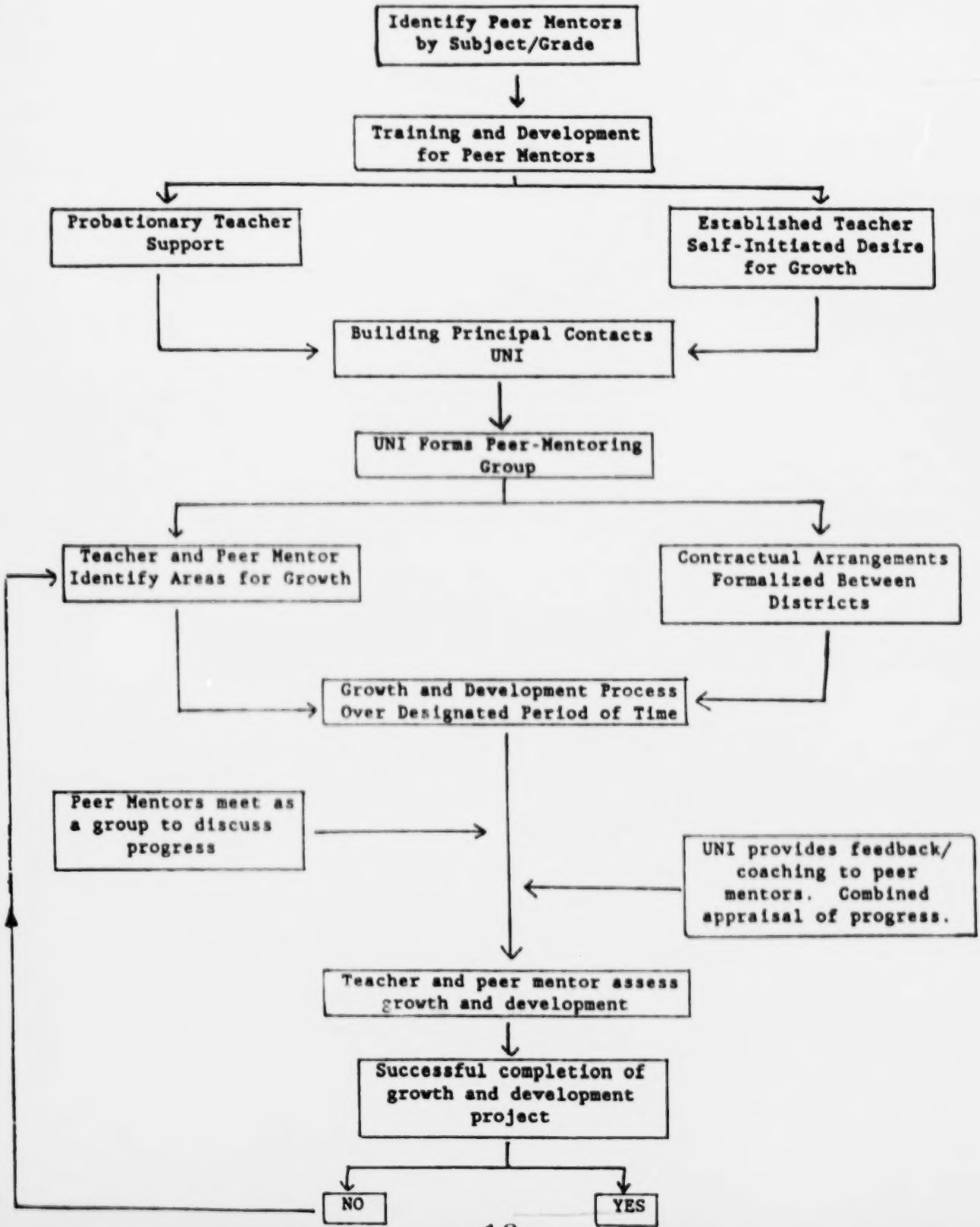
3. The legalities involved in the peer coaching process. In short, provisions need to be established to ensure peer coaches are immune from rectifying in any grievance hearings.

4. The possibility that endorsement of the project may have to have the approval of the local teachers' union.

5. The need within a network of school districts to arrive at a common definition of terms such as "Master Teacher" and "Peer Coaches." These definitions may best be conceptualized as a set of competencies/expectations.

March 1989

Peer Mentoring: An Iowa Model for Professional Development


Identify Peer Mentors by Subject/Grade
Training and Development for Peer Mentors
Probationary Teacher Support
Established Teacher Self-Initiated Desire for Growth
Building Principal Contacts UNI
UNI Forms Peer-Mentoring Group
Teacher and Peer Mentor Identify Areas for Growth
Contractual Arrangements Formalized Between Districts
Growth and Development Process Over Designated Period of Time
Peer Mentors meet as a group to discuss progress
UNI provides feedback/ coaching to peer mentors. Combined appraisal of progress.
Teacher and peer mentor assess growth and development
Successful completion of growth and development project
NO
YES